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ABSTRACT

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) programing is often criticized by standards or criteria that are out of date and misrepresented in terms of the audience response. There is a need for the development and application of critical standards that recognize and utilize the unique characteristics identified by Marshal McLuhan. Television audience response is often judged by a simple head count which is an archaic method of determining listeners. Public television programing needs to encourage audience participation with programs whose content has been thoroughly researched; but instead of researching why one program succeeds while another fails, PBS is satisfied to borrow from the British Broadcasting Company. One alternative would be to use the programs rejected by commercial networks, but which are acceptable to the PBS audience. The second alternative would call for PBS to take a more aggressive and systematic research approach to determine its audience and its preferences. (Author/DS)

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# GETTING OFF THE BACK OF THE BBC: OR HOW TO STOP SPONGING OFF RICH RELATIVES

Presented at the McLuhan Panel at the National Association of Educational Broadcasters Convention

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Critical Standards

According to McLuhan, television fosters many preferences that are quite at variance with literate uniformity and repeatablility. The main cause for disappointment in and for criticism of television is the failure on the part of its critics to view it as a totally new technology which demands different sensory responses. These critics insist on regarding television as merely a degraded form of print technology.

Public television has been even more guilty than the commercial TV networks of pandering to traditional print oriented critics who are applying out of date and inappropriate criteria to judge the quality of what the TV medium is doing. By relying on traditional high cultural level programs such as Masterpiece Theatre, Upstairs, Downstairs and other BBC programs and concepts, public TV gains critical acclaim while commercial TV draws both negative criticism and unfortunately most of the viewing audience. It has only recently become acceptable in academic circles to admit that you watch television.

What is needed then is the development and application of critical standards that recognize and utilize the unique characteristics of the television medium identified by McLuhan including its:

1. participatory nature
2. non-linear orientation
3. tactile quality
4. highly involving nature

By making these unique characteristics an integral part of public TV programming, not only will new critical standards accrue and gain acceptance, but the medium will have come a long way in escaping the influence of traditional critics.

Audiences

Public broadcasting has not succeeded through either its expressed mission or content of its programming in firmly establishing itself in the affections and

concerns of substantial portions of the American public. For example, figures indicate that public TV may be reaching about 31% of all American TV households weekly during the fall season. Closer scrutiny however, reveals that less than half of those households tune in general interest, prime time public TV programs each week.

Proponents of public TV's status quo argue naively that public TV programs are directed at minority audience tastes--tastes which are defined only after the fact--audience ratings show only infinitessimally small numbers demographically skewed viewers for most public TV programs. It is signigicant to note, however, that appeals to minority audiences are seldom if ever determined apriori--these are the tastes of a significant minority audience segments--it is past time to program to meet these needs. Programming on public TV is evidence of what McLuhan meant by moving ahead while looking into the rear view mirror.

Part of the problem is that the image of audiences remains interpreted by traditional insensitive mass society standards including:

1. simple numerical/quantitative head counts
2. general demographic description
3. mass audience stereotypes
4. traditional mass media use and gratifications

Even advertisers recognize the inherent limitations of using those categories to predict taste, attitudes, and behavior. I must agree with McLuhan that we must develop new conceptualization of television audiences based on qualitative research that realizes that audiences are not passive sponges of media stimuli but tend to be:

1. active participants
2. media sophisticated
3. eager to become involved in creative dialogue.

Moreover, in McLuhan's electric age with increasing program alternatives via cable, video cassettes, and program subscription, public TV as a programming source

needs to carve out more target audiences with content that has been formatively researched for its appeal instead of trying to please McLuhan's traditional critics who apply literary standards to an electronic medium. If McLuhan is right about the involvement, the participatory and multisensory appeal of the television medium, then public TV needs to exploit the medium for clearly defined, media sophisticated intelligent persons who wish to become involved in completing the mosaic.

Programming

Audiences for commercial TV have indicated that certain types of program formats and appeals generally seem to work better than others--and yet--one situation comedy makes the top ten, while many others fail, one dramatic series is a success--draws large audiences--while a similar series fails to attract viewers at all or fails to maintain a sizable number of viewers to remain on the schedule. The sad fact is that no one, including commercial TV programmers knows why one show succeeds while others like it fail. It is still largely a matter of intuition. And as we all know, failure is very expensive. Instead of taking the initiative to encourage support or conduct basic research, public TV rejects attempts to answer these questions because it is not of interest to them or it is more simple to borrow from the BBC. This position is peculiar because such answers may possibly be the very key to public TV's survival as a programming source. Basic or pure television programming research appears to be essential to refining the most useful and effective course for public TV programmers to pursue.

McLuhan keeps reiterating that the medium of television itself is not compatable or comparable to other mass media. Television is an audiovisual, tactile/medium with a multisensory appeal. Moreover, it is low in definition, high in participation and viewer involvement. Perhaps most importantly TV is an instantaneous and simultaneous assault on many senses. These are the basic and essential characteristics worthy of exploitation by public TV programmers in the exploitation of attention in the audience. But we do not know what kinds of content exploits

or inhibits these potentially useful characteristics. Again, basic or pure research would help to specify those conditions which enhance or reward viewing behavior--those conditions which will increase viewer involvment and participation. The point here is that we are currently in a state of near total ignorance about the nature, process, and effects of the very medium we work in--television. Unless, essential knowledge is compiled and applied, those who have the audiences now--the commercial TV programmers--will continue that role, and the new electric media with more carefully researched audiences needs and uses will strangle public TV to the point of extinction.

Alternatives

In McLuhan's "Electric Age" public TV is rapidly approaching a critical stage regarding the direction and focus of its programming.

1. One alternative is to pursue a revival of the "Fourth network" concept rejected by the Carnegie Commission. Such an attempt would include programming those vehicles which reach large segments of the minority audience not viewing commercial TV which were unacceptable to commercial TV programmers because mass audience appeal seemed either unlikely, risky, or unprofitable.

Ironically, when it can, public TV still chooses to talk about its successes in mass audience terms e.g., the recent rating success of the "Incredible Machine" the National Geographic special that the networks turned down. This alternative, however, seems unlikely because it presents major apparently unsolvable problems. First, appeal would be primarily to only a small segment of the "public" the wealthier, better educated viewers who like cultural offerings. This means that public in public TV is a great misnomer, as FCC commissioner Hooks constantly argues and the commercial TV programs are conceded to the mass audience.

Secondly, such an approach presents the all too familiar funding problems in that economic resources would have to be amassed to produce a consistant program schedule of even, high quality material. With public TV's checkered history of funding irregularities, such an approach would become fatalistic.

2. The second alternative and seemingly the most realistic one, calls for public television to take a much more aggressive and systematic approach to determining their audiences and their preferences apriori--in effect substantially new conceptualizations of TV audiences, and qualitative research to determine how those audiences may participate in which kinds of programs.